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ABSTRACT

This study was designed: (1) to examine in depth family-related variables in 30 rural working-class families in order to determine whether there are certain life-style differences between those whose sons achieve at or above grade level and those whose sons' achievements fall below grade level; and (2) to gather information on how early boys begin to formulate realistic notions about future career goals. Data were collected from school records, teacher ratings, and family interviews. Each mother completed Rotter's scale of internal vs. external locus of control, each father, Rehberg's Mobility Attitudes Scale and a short open-ended questionnaire on attitudes toward work. Both parents and son were given an additional structured questionnaire. Results indicate a consensus on values related to parenting styles, desirable attributes for preadolescent sons, and expectations and aspirations for educational and occupational attainments. Actual characteristics of the sons whose school achievements fell below grade level differed from those whose achievements were average or better. Parents are often unaware of the influence they have on their sons' educational and occupational goals and lack of information for effective vocational guidance. Parent education for educational and vocational planning should begin as early as seventh grade. (Author/CS)

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RURAL FAMILY LIFE STYLE AND SONS' SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT[1]

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ABSTRACT

A study of rural working-class families shows consensus on values related to parenting styles, desirable attributes for pre-adolescent sons, and expectations and aspirations for educational and occupational attainment. Actual characteristics of the sons, however, differ between those whose school achievement fell below grade level and those who were average or better.

Parents, unaware of the influence they have on their sons' educational and occupational goals, lack information for effective vocational guidance. Parent education for educational and vocational planning should begin as early as seventh grade.

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RURAL FAMILY LIFE STYLE AND SONS' SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Of major interest to professionals in education and social welfare are those processes by which a boy attains a place in the adult working world. Formal schooling provides the principal path to job and career, but educational opportunity does not automatically guarantee a satisfactory achievement level. Cumulative results of studies from the past decade make it increasingly apparent that "family background" variables influence both school achievement and educational attainment.

The purpose of this study was to examine in depth these family-related variables in rural working-class families in order to determine whether there are certain life-style differences between those whose sons achieve at or above grade level and those whose sons' achievements fall below grade level.

If there are differences in the life styles of families within the same range of income which are associated with the school performance of the sons, such differences might suggest possible ways of providing help to families who are less successful in encouraging school achievement.

A secondary aim of the study was to gather information on how early boys begin to formulate realistic notions about future educational and career goals.

Method of Study

In a rural mid-western county two working-class hamlets were identified. Each community had only one grade school. In order to collect highly detailed case studies, the sample was limited to families whose sons were in the fifth (N + 16) or sixth (N + 14) grade. Preadolescent boys were chosen for two reasons: (1) to control for sex differences, given the small number of families, and (2) to avoid the complicating effects of puberty changes. Also, as indicated, we were interested in how early rural non-farm boys begin to think about their future jobs.

Information came from three sources:

1) School records provided (a) IQ scores, (b) a three-semester cumulative grade-point average, and (c) percentile rank on a composite score for the Iowa Test of Basic Achievement. Students at and below the 37th percentile on county and school district norms comprised the "below average" group. Those "average or above" were at or above the 67th percentile. Raw scores were not available.
2) Teachers rated each student as either "average or above" or "below average."
3) Each family was interviewed for a total of twelve hours. Two interviewers worked simultaneously with mother and father or with mother and son in separate areas of the home.

The initial interviews with mother and son used an eliciting technique. Respondent's own words became the further probes to determine the exact meaning of answers given to the original question. "Elicited" in this instance were value orientations related to desired characteristics for a boy of ten or ~~eleven~~ 11. Responses of mother and son showed a high degree of agreement.

Subsequently, a structured questionnaire was used with each parent and the son. Items related to parental power, support, inclusion, and goal setting; son's achievement orientation, autonomy, acceptance of authority, and independence; a range of educational and occupational expectations and aspirations -- both the son, for himself, and each parent for the son; and a list of desirable characteristics for a son, to be rank-ordered. This ordered list was later compared for congruence with the elicited list from the first interview, and across responses by mother, father, and son in each family.

Mothers provided a family history which included information on occupation, education, health, income and religion for both husband and wife; size and composition of the household; kinship and friendship ties; use of leisure time; and use of community resources.

Rotter's (1966:1) scale of internal vs. external locus of control was completed by the mothers, and an adaptation for students was used with the boys.

Rehberg's Mobility Attitudes Scale (Rehberg, et al, 1970:34) was given to the fathers, together with a short open-ended questionnaire

on attitudes toward work including the man's plans for his occupational future five years hence.

Three judges read all of the material secured from these fami , interviews and made independent assignments to one of two categories: (1) son's achievement is average or above; or (2) son's achievement is below average. The judges did not see any information from school records such as IQ, grade point average, or teacher's rating. Judgments based on family responses to the interview schedules and questionnaire items were made by using criteria derived from the literature on childhood socialization and school achievement. Judges were able to assign correctly 28 out of 30 families.

Characteristics of the families

Three fathers were salesmen and one was an electrical technician. Using Hollingshead's two-fact index of socioeconomic status, these four were the highest on a ranking that extended downward through skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. All but one of the fathers was employed at the time of the interviews but seven had been unemployed for an average of five weeks during the year preceeding. One-third of the fathers had a second job; more fathers of good students than those of low achievers worked in excess of 48 hours per week. Half of the mothers worked in factory or service jobs. In most of these families, parents looked after their children by working different shifts.

All fathers and mothers claimed to be in generally good health. Two in three had seen a doctor during the preceding year but few had lost work time due to sickness or accident.

Fathers of low achievers had an average of ten years of schooling, compared to ~~twelve~~ 12 years for the others. The average for all mothers was ~~eleven~~ 11 years of school. Ten boys had a parent who had not liked school; of these boys, nine were low achievers.

Church membership and religious participation was less among the ~~eighteen~~ 5 families of low achievers; only three fathers and six mothers were active participants. All average or better students belonged to families whose fathers and mothers were active church members.

All parents of good students were partners in first marriages and there had been no separations. Four of ~~eighteen~~ 13 poor students had experienced divorce or temporary separation.

The families were long-time residents in the county and had lived in their present homes for an average of six years. Half of the parents' grandparents were foreign born, and a third of the parents' own parents were foreign born. The parents' fathers had been in low-prestige occupations. Twenty-eight out of ~~thirty~~ 30 families had siblings living nearby. The siblings and friends had the same types of occupations as the parents. The families relied on relatives for help in case of sickness and ~~twelve~~ 12 had borrowed money from relatives during the previous year.

Only half of the mothers reported belonging to any organized social group. Two-thirds of the fathers of good students, compared

to one-third of the fathers of poor students, belonged to one or more organizations. This, together with higher religious pariticipation, suggests that fathers of good students are more socially integrated into community life.

Forty-five percent of the mothers were between 17 and 19 years of age when their first child was born. This is not surprising, in view of their low level of educational attainment and high stability of residence. Half of the mothers had four or more children living at home. Good students were equally likely to be in small or large families; poor students were somewhat more likely to be in large families. First-born children were equally likely to be good or poor students, while low achievers were more likely to be second or later born. None of these mothers wanted more children; only one "expected" that she would have more anyway.

Summary

This was a group of stable families, most of whom were steadily employed in working-class occupations. There were no chronic health problems and health care was available and used. Friends and relatives could be counted on for help when need arose but most families also made use of professional services. They were long-time residents in their neighborhoods and said that they would miss "everything" if they had the misfortune to have to move out of the county. They were satisfied with their present number of children and seemed successful in fertility control. The women had low educational attainment and became mothers in their late teens. Half

of them were working. The families differed mostly in the amount of their religious, civic, and social participation. In this relatively homogeneous group, those who were active participants had sons who were getting along better in school.

Outcomes

All but one of the 12 average or better students belonged to families whose SES ranking was above the mean of 50, using Hollingshead's two factor index for social class. Five lower achievers placed in this (relative to the total group) higher SES group; of these five boys, two had IQ scores of 83 and 86. Only one higher achiever placed in the group of families below the mean SES for the group. Even in this restricted range of SES rankings, socioeconomic status is a significant correlate of achievement ranking.

All higher achievers had high grade point averages (X-3.3). However, half of the lower achievers had grade point averages at or above the mean of 2.7 for the total subject group. Teacher ratings presented a similar picture. Teachers rated 11 out of 12 of the higher achievers as "good" students; they did no better than random assignment for the lower achievers, placing 11 in the "poor" student category and assigning eight to the "good" category. Neither grades nor teacher ratings correlated with lower percentile ranks for achievement. We speculate that appropriate role behavior, indicative of good social adaptation, influenced teacher judgment of student performance. There was no significant difference in mean IQ between

the two groups. Neither mother's nor son's locus of control score distinguished the lower from the average or above average achievers. Nor was there any correlation between the mother's locus of control score and the father's mobility attitudes score, or between the son's locus of control score and the father's mobility attitudes score. Eleven of the 12 higher achieving sons had high mobility scores, even though their fathers' scores were evenly divided--six and six--above and below the mean for the total group. Of the 18 lower achievers, 11 scored at or above the mean; high mobility attitudes scores seemed to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for achievement in these families.

All of the higher achievers wanted to continue school after high school graduation; only one expected that he would be unable to do so. Fourteen of the lower achievers wanted to go on beyond high school, indicating the high value placed on education by rural working-class families.

Sixteen of the 30 boys had unrealistically high educational expectations, when compared with their occupational expectations. This indicates both uncritical acceptance of the norm that everyone should go to college and ignorance of the educational requirements for various kinds of jobs. The importance of being a good student and going to college was explained by one of the low achievers:

> "If ya don't get good grades, ya're not gonna make it. Ya won't get to college and if ya don't get to college, ya won't get a good job, and if

ya don't get a good job, ya're not gonna survive in this world."

The hero for these 11 and 12 year-old boys is the professional athlete. In fact, several boys aspire to sports careers while saying that they expect to be other kinds of professionals--school teachers, lawyers, or veterinarians, for example.

Only three boys chose esoteric or vaguely defined occupations when describing aspirations or expectations: two chose "scientist" with little notion of what that might be, and one chose oceanography, a profession far removed from his everyday life in the rural midwest. The others chose jobs with which they were familiar, those for whom there were models close at hand: carpenter, meatcutter, storekeeper, painter, welder, plumber, auto mechanic.

In all, only nine, or about a third of the total group, expected to have jobs that would require a college education, although 24 of the 30 wanted or expected to go to college. Two-thirds of the group expected to have skilled or semi-skilled jobs similar to those of their fathers (although not necessarily the same job) for which a high school education would be the maximum educational requirement. Not atypical was the good student with an IQ of 119 who aspired and expected to be a carpenter. His father was a carpenter and by father's self-report he did not like school.

Finally, in assessing the responses of mothers, fathers, and sons in each individual family, it is apparent that parents are generally inadequately informed and rarely think about discussing occupational choice with the boys. Only four fathers and seven mothers of the 60 parents had ever talked with their sons about future jobs or careers. However, the boys were already setting their own goals in terms of generational succession, based on the working models in their small home town. This seems to be, therefore, a propitious age for schools to initiate parent-discussion groups to provide information on various kinds of jobs - their nature, their educational requirements, and the best ways to prepare for them. Information such as that gathered here has identified some families whose expectations seem unrealistic and who might profit from both group discussions and individual counseling. Four cases in point:

(1) two boys who are poor students, scoring at the 05 and 08th percentile on the Iowa Basic, with IQ's of 81 and 87, who "aspire" to quit school before high school graduation, but who expect to go to college because their parents want them to;

(2) a boy who is a good student, with a B+ cumulative average, high mobility attitudes score, and who ranks in the 74th percentile on the achievement tests, who wants to go to college but whose parents' ambition for him is to be a hospital aide or a gas station attendant;

(3) a boy who is a low achiever, whose IQ is 119 and whose mother and father said, "Education beyond high school is apt to spoil an otherwise good boy."

Value orientations

There were no differences between mothers with higher achieving sons and mothers with low achieving sons ragarding the characteristics they desired to develop in their sons. This may be seen as evidence for commonly shared cultural values, values very much like those of the American core culture.

The following is a list of responses elicited during the initial round of interviews with the mothers:

Question: What qualities would you like to see in an 11-year-old boy?

1. studiousness, industry, academic achievement
2. sense of responsibility
3. good manners, respectful, polite
4. consideration for others
5. ability to get along with others
6. honesty
7. good morals, religious
8. athletic ability
9. ambition
10. acts like a boy

The sons were asked the following question: "Imagine you are grown up and the father of an 11-year-old boy. What would you like to see in your son?" The list of characteristics which was independently generated by the sons was identical to the mothers' list, with two exceptions. Sons did not mention "ambition" and they added one attribute: "healthy."

Frequently ignored in survey research is the possible difference between categories imposed by the questionnaire and responses that might be elicited from the respondents by asking open-ended questions ("What would you like to see in your 11-year-old son?"), followed by using the respondents' own language to probe for more specific meanings ("What would he be like if he were 'obedient'? Tell me more about what 'obedience' means.").

The use of the eliciting technique in the initial interview minimized the possibility that answers would be colored by response choices offered later in the questionnaire. Responses to the two modes of questioning showed that the structured questionnaire listed five characteristics which were not elicited during the first interview:

1. sound judgment
2. obedience
3. neatness and cleanliness
4. self-control
5. interest in "how" and "why"

In view of the emphasis on being neat and clean which is generally attributed to core culture families, it is interesting to

note that only one mother mentioned this in her list of desirable attributes:

> "I guess he could be a little neater. For example, his clothes. I'm afraid to go into his pockets, you know. One day I found a salamander in the washing machine."

Open-ended questions generated eight of the 13 categories in the structured questionnaire:

6. acts like a boy
7. good student
8. good manners
9. responsible
10. gets along with others
11. honesty
12. consideration for others
13. tries hard to succeed

The questionnaire items did not include two characteristics which have high salience for all of these families: boys should be good in sports, and they should have good morals and be religious.

The reasons given for valuing athletic skills are related to parental approval and reward, character building, and fear of social isolation:

> "Sports are important . . . to make the team so your Dad will be proud of you, so he will play with

you or do things for you like let you use the car when you're older."

"He must know how to lose as well as win."

"The best way to have friends is to be good in sports." (And, as a corollary) . . . "you don't get any place in this world if you're alone." "Having lots of friends is important because you've got somebody to depend on." "So you'll have somebody to talk to."

"If you weren't good in sports you probably wouldn't have many friends and you'd be poor and you'd probably live in an old house. You'd just be alone."

The dread of social isolation is a theme that appears again and again in these interviews. Sports participation is not an end in itself, but is a means to friendship or father's approval so that family and friends can be counted on for help in case life turns up some unexpected, unpleasant surprise.

Along the same line of reasoning, the norm of reciprocity has as its rationale the recognition of mutual dependence. A person is polite, considerate, and mannerly because that is how one keeps friends and wins allies.

"Teachers always favor a nice, well-behaved child. You can't just barge into the world, you have to work you way in."

Even the virtues of honesty and responsibility have, at bottom, the rewards of help in times of trouble. One mother expressed it like this:

"Responsibility leads to self-confidence and to honesty. Honesty leads to a better life and you keep out of trouble, because you gotta live with those (other) people. All people are insecure to some degree. If you aren't responsible you will get to be very insecure, a dependent, miserable, self-pitying person. He (her son) wouldn't like himself and nobody wants to be around this type of individual. How can you be accepted by society if you're miserable with yourself?"

A boy, explaining why it is important not to be a troublemaker:

"Well, if you're not a troublemaker people think you come from a better class of people, but if you're a troublemaker, people will think you come from the city where people don't care what happens to you."

Styles of parenting

All of the mothers supervised their sons fairly closely. A son was not "allowed out" every evening; his mother knew most or all of his friends; she generally asked how he spent his money; checked to see if homework got done; looked at his report card and knew what grades he received. Mothers gave praise and material rewards for good report cards. If grades were low, they gave advice. Both fathers and mothers said their boy would have liked less help with homework than he actually received. Scolding or physical restrictions were the usual punishments. At this age, the mother generally made the final choice on buying clothes for the boy, but listened to his preferences. Children still wanted help with their own decision making and usually considered their parents' wishes. Although the mother wished her son would make more "decisions on his own," she also said the boy was "quite confident" and even wished "he were less sure of himself." Children confirmed that their mothers "explain the reasons for the rules." Moreover, they didn't want to change the rules very much; parents were right because they were parents. They knew more about life and they took care of you. The boys said their parents were interested in listening to what they had to say. They took part in family discussions and talked things over which concerned their own interests at least once a week. All boys said they were "close" to their mothers, but only half of them thought this was "closer than most boys." This is interesting because all boys said they were close to their

fathers, "closer than most boys." The boys reported that both mother and father tried to understand problems and "it helped to talk to them" when one was upset, although about half of the boys admitted they sometimes "got nervous" when talking to mother or father. Both mother and father found ways to "let me know they love me." The boys thought parents were fair in the amount of responsibility assigned.

Styles of childrearing as described by both mothers and sons can be characterized as authoritarian (N=18), autocratic (N=7), or democratic (N=5). Not one son said, "I can do what I want regardless of her wishes" (laissez-faire), or "Mother doesn't care what I do" (ignoring). Mothers' scores on power and control did not differentiate high from low achievers. The only variable that differentiated the two groups of mothers was the mother's satisfaction with her son. Whether he was perceived by her to be more dependent than independent, autonomous or asking help with decisions, ambitious or distracted by play, persistent at tasks or a bit irresponsible, what really counted was that she thought this was right for a boy his age -- she gave acceptance and approval.

Fathers as a total group showed interest in their sons. It was noted earlier that when mothers worked, parents often took different shifts so that they shared responsibility for child supervision. Sons were more shy toward their fathers and affection was given indirectly through playing games, watching TV and so forth. The fathers tended to wish their sons were more ambitious; they said "he doesn't push hard enough."

Fathers as work models

The fathers had started working for money by the age of ten or 12. Most of them began by helping their own fathers on a farm. The men liked to work and found it intrinsically satisfying; they did not think of work only as a means to earn a living. They felt responsible to the boss and to the family for doing a "good day's work." Most said they would be very satisfied to earn $10,000 a year.

Their notion of a good worker was one who is honest, conscientious, gives a full day's work for his pay, and does what he is told. A poor worker is lazy, late for work, not dependable, "just in it for the money." Maybe he gets drunk and doesn't even show up for work, which is unfair to the other workers as well as to the boss. The men accepted authority: "Everybody needs a boss." But the boss must be fair and worthy of respect. Good workers are loyal to their fellow workers who are "good guys, even if they don't always do good work."

When asked about their future, seven of the 30 fathers expected to be doing something different, to advance themselves occupationally, to get ahead. But the other 23 expected to remain with the same job or the same line of work. Either they admitted candidly that they had already reached the limits of their abilities, or else they were union members who would not sacrifice seniority benefits to change jobs.

Only six of the 30 sons aspired to occupations above the level of their father's job. All sons knew what kind of work their fathers did.

The only factor that differentiated the fathers of higher achievers from those of lower achievers was not directly related to the father-son relationship; it was the father's satisfaction with himself as a worker and as a provider of economic security for his family. This, of course, implied satisfaction with himself in the husband/father role.

Conclusion

We live in one of those apparently recurring times when schooling and learning, intelligence and achievement, youth and parenthood have become politicized almost beyond the point of rational discussion.

Whether reading social science literature or popular magazines, we find expressions of despair about the educational attainment of students and, invariably, a single major villain is identified. People who in other contexts recognize the complexities of assigning causation to behavioral events proclaim a single major "cause" of alleged poor school achievement. While there is general agreement that certain behaviors are shaped by the total context in which the behavior occurs, academic achievement is exempted from this insight of twentieth century science. A major conclusion of

this study is that, for these sons, there are many ways to fail in school but there is only one right way to succeed. Successful students had all of the following characteristics:

1) Given a restricted range of occupations, their fathers had better jobs.
2) IQ scores ranged from 109 to 142, above the group mean of 105.
3) Teachers rated them as good students.
4) Their mean GPA, cumulative for three semesters, was 3.3.
5) They had high occupational mobility attitudes, and they all expected to go to college.
6) They correctly perceived their parents' expectation that they would go to college.
7) They were trusting and accepting of parental authority.
8) They felt included and integrated into the family, and perceived their parents as affectionate and as interested in them as people.
9) There was high value consensus between mother and son. In fact, there was high agreement in the responses of mothers, fathers and sons to the same questionnaire items administered separately and simultaneously.
10) They knew what their fathers were doing at work and they aspired to similar kinds of jobs.
11) Their fathers were satisfied with their own work achievements and felt successful as breadwinners for the family.

12) Their mothers, though ambitious for them, were accepting and approving.

The boy's world is small and comprehensible. Relationships are stable, and if one is a decent fellow there will be kin and friends to help in times of trouble. For the present, however, life is good. When one ten-year-old was asked to imagine himself in the future, as the father of his own ten-year-old son, and to describe what he would want his son to be like at that age, he responded:

> "Ah, let's see. I would like him to be smart and healthy. Ah. Let's let him do what he wants to do most of the time. Let him do what most of the other boys do. And let him do what I did as a boy of ten!"

Boys who were low achievers also shared a stable neighborhood and family life and the same core culture values. Parents hoped they would go to college and most of the boys expected that they would, without knowing just what that meant. A few had unrealistically high occupational aspirations, with no notion of what the jobs entailed, but most wanted jobs like those of the men they saw at work around them.

In these respects they were no different from the higher achievers. But here the similarities between subgroups ended and even the cluster of characteristics common to the low achievers

disintegrated: some had high IQ's and some had low IQ's; some had "C-plus" or better grade point averages; some were rated by teachers as "good students," some perceived an internal and others an external locus of control; some had high occupational mobility scores and others were low scorers; some had mothers who were satisfied with them and others had mothers who wished they were more independent or more dependent, or more confident or less confident, or more ambitious or less ambitious. The fathers were resigned to their present jobs and many felt inadequate as bread-winners for their families.

In short, there was great variability among the sons and their families in the lower achieving group. Each boy had some of the characteristics of the higher achieving group, but not all. Somehow he doesn't get it all together; there seem to be many ways to fail but only one way to achieve for these rural, non-farm boys.

If one were to recommend ways to improve the life chances of the lower achievers in families similar to those in this study, economic security that is neither stigmatizing nor compromising to the father's self-esteem is a crucial factor. Increasing the mother's satisfaction with her child, by changing his behaviors and/or modifying her expectations, is another challenging task. One intervention that would be useful for both groups of parents, and one that would not require a great investment of time or personnel, is that of parent discussion groups focusing not on "the problems you are having with your kid," but on vocational preparation and guidance. Dealing with the parents instead of directly with the

children avoids a role reversal, i.e., children educating their parents. In a community where the accepted norm is "parents know best," this would be especially important.

These parents, like many others, do not realize the influence they have on developing their sons' skills, aptitudes and aspirations for future work careers. Recently a successful parent education program (Shoffner and Klemer, 1973:419) in southern Appalachia involved 112 low-income mothers in a series of three meetings to provide them with information enabling them to help their 7th and 8th grade children plan for careers. Group leaders and guests described the educational and vocational skills needed for a variety of occupations, suggesting ways to seek out and use vocational preparation information and emphasizing the importance of taking into account each child's unique interests and talents. This particular program was sponsored by Cooperative Extension. School social workers or guidance counselors would be other appropriate initiators of discussion groups in which parents can learn about preparing their children for successful participation in the adult working world.

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